

# REFLECTIONS

## LIBRARIES

Robert Silverberg

I was always a reader—I had begun to master the knack of it before I turned four—and my parents saw that I was well supplied with books from an early age. (I still have some of them: *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Complete Lewis Carroll*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Maltese Falcon*, a Rudyard Kipling omnibus, Padraic Colum's retellings of the Greek and Norse myths, and an assortment of books about dinosaurs, geology, botany, and astronomy, inscribed to me on various birthdays, dating from 1943, 1944, 1945.) My life as a science fiction writer, I'm certain, was constructed out of that hodgepodge of science and fantasy, the dinosaur/astronomy/geology books, the adventures of Odin and Thor, Zeus and Hermes, Carroll's two novels of Wonderland, and the rest.

But very quickly I learned that although I had an abundance of books at home, there was a marvelous place called the library that had even more, infinitely more, more books than I could possibly ever read even though I took an armload of them out every week. Which I did: the bookish child that I was helped himself constantly and abundantly from the library. I am still bookish even now, a diligent reader, and over the course of many decades I have built a vast library of my own, so that I need go no more than a few steps to lay my hands on any book I care to read. (And if I don't have it on the premises, the Internet makes it just a couple of clicks away.) So I rarely visit public libraries any more; but I cherish the memories I have of the libraries of yesteryear, public libraries and school libraries both, golden memories indeed. I think fondly back to the soft red-leather cushions of the window seats at my high school library, high above the streets of Brooklyn (1949-52), and the mysterious

infinite stacks of the Columbia University Library (1952-1956), but in particular I like to look backward in time to the libraries of the even earlier years when I was first beginning to develop my love of science fiction.

The public school I attended in my Brooklyn childhood from 1943 to 1946 had no library. But the junior high school that was the next stop for me—middle school, I guess they call it today—had not only a well-stocked library but a requirement that we spend a specific time, an hour or two a week, reading there. I remember a long room with wooden benches, at which we duly sat, turning pages. It was during my junior high school days that I discovered science fiction, but it's a safe bet that there was no SF in that school library, though I surely went looking for it. What I found instead—still vivid in my memory—were the boys' baseball novels of John R. Tunis, a popular series in the 1930s and 1940s about the exploits of (fictional) players for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Since I was a Brooklyn boy, the Dodgers were my team, of course—ancient history, now—and, eleven, twelve years old, I gobbled the Tunis books up. But also I recall reading Israel Zangwill's nineteenth-century novels of life in the Jewish ghetto of London, where my father was born, and R.D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*, a novel of which I can remember nothing except the fact of my having read it. And then there was Talbot Mundy's 948-page *Tros of Samothrace*, a historical novel with some touches of fantasy. These days I would hesitate and ponder before investing such a chunk of remaining lifespan as a 948-page book would demand, but at eleven, with all eternity stretching before me, I saw no problem about it at all. (This, perhaps, explains the willingness of today's young

to embark on the near-infinite expanse of the Harry Potter books.)

It was the exciting depiction of Roman life in Caesar's time that drew me to *Tros*. By 1948, though, what I really wanted was science fiction. I had discovered the pulp magazines, *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* and the rest of that ilk, and I had begun to write my own first pitiful little short stories, and also I had found books like H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which I belatedly realized were science fiction also. I knew there had to be other books of that kind somewhere, and I began to search the Brooklyn Public Library for them.

The quest began at the grand and glorious main building of the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza, about a twenty-minute walk from my house. I had been going there since I was eight or nine, usually on Saturday mornings, staring up at the imposing stone façade of the magnificent building and then walking around to the side, through a magical iron gate that led to the children's room. Over the years that room was my source for many of the standard children's books, the Peter Pan books, the Mary Poppins books, Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, W.H. Hudson's *Little Boy Lost*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and the like, and some that were not so standard, such as *The Book of Kings*, a translation of the Persian epic poem *The Shah-Namah*, which haunts me to this day.

But now, thirteen years old, I made so bold as to go around to the front entrance, to the adult wing of the building, and with trembling hands I rummaged through the card catalog looking for science fiction books. The card entry for "science fiction" referred me to "pseudoscientific fiction," a term which struck my high-minded younger self as offensive, but I hurried on nonetheless to the "P" section of the catalog and there found, indeed, several dozen books of pseudoscientific fiction. What riches were listed there! All the novels of H.G. Wells, and several by John Taine, whose

novel *Before the Dawn* I had discovered a few months earlier, and even a few of the modern-day SF novels that had lately been issued by valiant fan-owned small presses, L.Ron Hubbard's *Slaves of Sleep* and L. Sprague de Camp's *The Wheels of If* and Robert A. Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon*. And off I scurried to the fiction shelves to find them.

Without success. I never found a one. Again and again I searched those shelves, but someone else had always taken out the books. Gradually I realized that I wasn't the only science fiction reader in Brooklyn, and that others, who lived closer to the big main library than I did, were searching those shelves just as assiduously as I was and snatching up all the pseudoscientific literature just ahead of my next Saturday visit.

But there was another library branch, a much smaller one, just a short walk from my home, one that I had visited regularly all through my elementary-school years. This was the Eastern Parkway Library, at Schenectady Avenue. I haven't set foot in it in sixty years, and I probably never will again, living as I do three thousand miles away. But it's still there, says the Brooklyn Public Library's web site. I remember it as a charmingly antiquated-looking place, dimly lit, with wood paneling and huge wooden shelves, but it surely doesn't look anything like that now: the library web site says that the original 1914 building has been renovated several times, most recently in 1975, and my guess is that it's now a place of metal shelving and glaring fluorescent lighting, and that the books I found in the Children's Room long ago (those nineteenth-century collections of myths and fables, in sturdily bound editions published, mostly, between 1920 and 1940) have been replaced by the slick, slender product of modern children's-book publishing. The web site tells me that the current Children's Room has four computers available. That tells the whole story right there.

When I was going to that library, primarily between 1945 and 1949, one thing

that the Children's Room had, where those computers most likely are now, was a bound set of *St. Nicholas Magazine* with crimson covers stamped in gold, volume after volume, running from the 1890s through, I suppose, 1935 or so—a beautifully printed children's magazine of yestercentury. I used to look through them in wonder, astonished at seeing actual ancient magazines from the nineteenth century. (The nineteenth century wasn't really all that remote in time, then—only fifty years separated 1898 and 1948, which seemed an awesome gulf to the me of the eighth grade, but no greater than the gap that separates John F. Kennedy's 1962 from the year 2012.)

Another set of books I remember from those early visits to the Eastern Parkway Library was the Oxford English Dictionary—a dozen huge volumes, safely stored behind the librarian's desk in the front hall. We had a dictionary at home, of course, the second edition of Webster's International, a big yellow folio, but each of these dozen volumes was far bigger than that one. I couldn't imagine how there could be that many words in the English language. The librarian let me look at it once—I must have been about ten—and I reverently turned its immense pages, pondering the vastness of our language and in all likelihood dreaming of owning a set of those books myself some day. (I never have; but I do keep close by my desk the one-volume Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, only 2515 pages long, a mere semblance of the unabridged book, but one that has proven adequate for my needs.)

I couldn't withdraw *St. Nicholas* or the O.E.D. from that library, but I must have carried hundreds of other books home over the years: all the great children's classics, three or four at a time. But the

critical one, the one that set my head spinning and changed my life, was a slim paperback that I found one day in 1948, after I had stopped hunting for children's classics and had begun looking for "pseudoscientific fiction." It was *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim, a 310-page volume of short stories that ranged from the work of Ambrose Bierce and H.G. Wells to such modern masters of science fiction as Theodore Sturgeon, Robert A. Heinlein, and John W. Campbell, Jr. I have a bright memory of standing on the steps of the library on a sunny autumn day, staring in triumph at the small book in my hand—and then sprinting home to revel in it. How splendid it was to discover Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" in it, and T.S. Stripling's mysterious "The Green Splotches," and Sturgeon's "Microscopic God"! That book kindled an appetite in me that has not been sated to this day.

I don't go to the library any more. I have my own copy of that Wollheim anthology—a 1947 printing, which I must have bought with twenty-five hard-earned cents soon after returning the library's copy—and I possess all those other books of yesteryear too, now. If I want to read Heinlein or Hubbard or De Camp—or *Winnie the Pooh*, for that matter, or *The Water Babies*, or *The Book of Kings*—I need only go downstairs and cast my eye along my own shelves. But I will never forget those library days of long ago, the excitement of discovery, the sense that these wondrous books were shaping me into the person I would become. And I suspect that each of you has some similar memory of your own.

Copyright © 2012 Robert Silverberg